*Economic & Social Studies, Vol. 7, 1993 – 1994*
Journal of the Faculty of Economics, Management and Accountancy of the University of Malta

# TOURISM AND COMMUNITY CELEBRATIONS IN MALTA

David E. Zammit

This paper aims to explore the relationship between tourism and community celebrations.[1] This relationship is often presented as being of an uni-directional casual nature, with positive or negative effects depending on the observer's prejudices. Hence some argue that tourism boosts such ritual events, providing an audience and funds which expand their size. Others point to increasing disaffection with such rituals on the part of the 'locals', as the meaning of the event is irreparably altered in the process of turning it into a tourist commodity. On the basis of observations I made while conducting anthropological fieldwork in a Maltese village[2] which I will here call Hal-Harrub, I shall argue that both views are misleading insofar as they overlook the polysemic nature of ritual events and the manifold effects of tourism.

My starting point is the *Lejla Ħarrubija*, a community celebration which is staged in Ħal-Ħarrub on a Sunday night two or three weeks before the village festa. This celebration involves various events and performances, such as an agriculatural fair, folk-dancing by village youths and *għana*[3] by professional *għannejja* imported from outside the village. These performances take place at night, on a specially constructed floodlit wooden stage in the village square and are introduced by a *compere*, who stresses the folkloristic significance of the events and connects them to the special role allegedly played by Ħal-Ħarrub in Maltese history. Many Maltese who reside outside the village attend this event as do an increasing number of tourists. Their presence is actively solicited by the committee which organises the *Lejla Ħarrubija*. Thus, I helped three village youths set up posters advertising the event on the major cross-roads leading to the village.

It is easy to take such a celebration at its face-value, as many tourists presumably do and see it as a quaint survival of ancient agrarian rites, which is now being altered and perhaps ruined by the participation of tourists. However, there are many indications that this is not the case. For one thing, I was told that this event originated in the early nineteen eighties,[4]although my interlocutors generally added that this event was the fore-runner of the *Lejla Maltija* celebrations which are now held in many Maltese towns and villages. Significantly, too, the village youths are taught their folk-dancing not by aged rustics, but by an up-to-date dancing master from the sophisticated town of Sliema. The *għannejja*, the *compere* and most of the other components of this celebration are imported from outside the village.

Clearly the *Lejla Ħarrubija* belongs to the category of "invented traditions", described by Eric Hobsbawm as:

> ...a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally *attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past* (my italics).[5]

Hobsbawm points out that one must not be misled by claims to immeasurable antiquity ascribed to such practices as the Highland kilt, or the British coronation ceremony. Even when particular aspects of these practices are genuinely antique, their revival is a response to present needs.

It is interesting to speculate as to the motives behind the creation of the *Lejla Ħarrubija*. It seems to have been associated with a general revival of interest in folklore starting in the late sixties and early seventies, itself related to the political and religious upheavals of that period. Thus, one observer has commented:

> An interesting feature of the development of folklore in Malta is that it took-off in the 1960's.[6]

It is also perhaps not irrelevant that Ħal-Ħarrub is one of the most geographically isolated communities in Malta, which is often seen as being behind the times. There is certainly a trend to exploit this archaic image for pecuniary motives. Ħal-Ħarrub is perhaps the most well-known village in Malta to have specialised in the cooking of the *fenkata*.[7] Various bars in the village offer this meal to other Maltese who are often middle-class urban youths. Going to Ħal-Ħarrub to eat a *fenkata* is, for these youths, a ritual involving contact with a romanticised past, which is perceived as somehow still alive in this remote corner of Malta. In this context, the claim that the *Lejla Ħarrubija* was the forerunner of other similar events may, whatever its factual basis, be highly significant. It shows that issues of originality and authenticity are closely associated with the *Lejla Ħarrubija* in the minds of the villagers. This event may therefore be seen as a strategic manipulation of Ħal-Ħarrub's primordial image, uniting the community in the task of attracting outsiders to the village, thus raising the self-esteem of the villagers and providing a flow of clientele to the local bars.[7a]

Other factors may be adduced to explain the *Lejla Ħarrubija*. Jeremy Boissevain claims that there has been an increase in community celebrations throughout Southern Europe, coupled with a qualitative change in the type of celebrations which are popular.[8] He relates this to factors such as the decline in emigration; the post-modern reaction to industrialisation and consequent revalorisation of past traditions; a reaction to increased isolation brought about by new patterns of work; the media explosion; the advent of mass tourism and increasing democratisation leading to a redefinition of legitimate culture.

Whatever the precise combination of factors which gave rise to this event, it is clear that it is not solely a festival *by* villagers *for* villagers. Outsiders to the village play a critical part in the proceedings leading up to this festival and supply a very substantial part of the audience. The content of the festival is only understandable as a portrayal of Ħal-Ħarrub as the villagers would like outsiders to see the village. Even if the reason for the invention of this "traditional" event is not, as I have suggested, the self-conscious manipulation of the outsiders' view of Ħal-Ħarrub in order to attract these same outsiders,it seems clear that we are here dealing with a celebration *by* the villagers, *of* their village and mainly *for* outsiders.[9]

This already casts major doubts on the thesis that tourism is associated with a decline in community celebrations, as we are here speaking of a celebration the *raison d'etre* of which appears to be inherently linked to the existence of an outside audience, whether it consists of "tourists" from other parts of Malta or from beyond our shores. It may be objected, however, that I am here speaking of a very artifical type of celebration. Surely other "insider" celebrations *by* a community for that same community are weakened and diluted by the overwhelming weight of mass tourism.

These arguments are bolstered by anthropological evidence such as Davydd J. Greenwood's case-study of the *Alarde* ritual staged by the Basque town of Fuenterrabia in Spain.[10] This ritual is a recreation of a key event in the town's history, when the city successfully withstood a French siege. It involves a mass procession by different groups, representing the different categories of the town's population and the firing of certain guns in unison. Greenwood observes that the significance of this ritual was to be found in its unifying effect. It represented the town to itself in a manner which showed that all the categories of the population had their specific contribution to make to the defence of a heroic, common, Basque identity. This sense of community served to alleviate the tensions and divisions engendered between the various sections of the town's populace in the preceding year and to counter the sense of alienation from civic life experienced by the increasing number of the town's inhabitants who were finding employment outside its confines.

The whole meaning of this ritual, Greenwood observes, was that it was an insider event. It was a performance *by* Fuenterrabia, *of* Fuenterrabia and *for* Fuenterrabia. However, the entire meaning of the event was destroyed by the advent of mass tourism. As a result of the increasing interest shown by tourists in the *Alarde,* the central government authorities decided that it should be staged twice a day in order to ensure that a larger number of tourists watched the proceedings. This, according to Greenwood, had a very negative effect on the attitudes of the Fuenterrabians to their ritual. It was now seen as being a performance *by* the Fuenterrabians *for* tourists. This resulted in a sense of confusion and cycnicism about the event, reflecting the loss of significance it had undergone. The town's inhabitants became apathetic about the whole celebration and many stopped taking part. Eventually, the municipal government was forced to consider paying people to take part in the ritual.

Ultimately, Greenwood argues, the mistake which the central government made was that it did not take into account the meaning of the *Alarde* for the participants, as part of a system of meanings by which the nature of reality is established. Instead the central government treated the *Alarde* as a commodity, as something which could be sold as part of a package for tourists. Tourism is particularly prone to lead to such a commoditisation of culture and therefore tends to have a disastrous effect on such rituals.

While it seems clear that tourism can have such an effect, I would argue that Greenwood's argument places too much emphasis on the destructive effect of tourism, while underrating (1) the fact that celebrations are constantly changing over time; (2) that they perform a variety of functions; (3) the human capacity to create different celebrations to replace those which have been destroyed and (4) that tourism may actually stimulate increased ritual activity, by way of reaction.

Thus in Ħal-Ħarrub the *Lejla Ħarrubija* event is followed, after one or two weeks, by a late-night disco in the village square. This celebration appears to be even more recent than the *Lejla Ħarrubija*. I view this disco as a reaction to the self-conscious folkloristic character of the *Lejla Ħarrubija* and an attempt to exorcise its characteristic focus on outsiders, by the creation of an event which is strictly for internal consumption. The contrasts between this event and the earlier folkdancing are schematically presented below:

| Lejla Ħarrubija | Disco |
|---|---|
| 1. Early night. | 1. Late night. |
| 2. Many outsiders present. | 2. Very few outsiders. |
| 3. Folk dancing. | 3. Modern dancing. |
| 4. Organised by established community leaders. Middle-class youths associated with Catholic Action, play an important role in the stage performances. | 4. Organised by a wild band of village youths from the lower classes. |
| 5. Highly ritualistic. | 5. Ludic and playful elements are pronounced.[11] |
| 6. Youths wear special rustic clothing. | 6. Youths wear ordinary clothes. |
| 7. Only a select few dance. | 7. Anyone can dance. |
| 8. The dancers prepare for their dancing for months before the event. | 8. The dancing is marked by improvisation. |
| 9. The platform and *compere* are imported into the village. | 9. Local youths construct the shack housing musical equipment and act as DJs. |

In the context of these sets of oppositions, it seems to me to be highly significant that both celebrations entail dancing and follow each other so closely. Here, the common (dance) idiom in which the celebrations are expressed serves both to highlight the intimate connection between these two celebrations and to place in relief the contrasts between them. Maltese festas do not normally contain any dancing and the combination of two events which do is too neat to be coincidental. The observer is almost forced to make comparisons. In doing so, the radical difference between the types of dancing which occur provides an insight into the true nature of both events. Paradoxically this shows us that when the villagers wish to present themselves to outsiders, they pose as rustic embodiments of Malta's past and when they hold the mirror up to themselves, they pose as participants in the modern world of the late twentieth century![12] Furthermore, it illustrates the point that community celebrations tend to spawn other ritual events which often arise by way of reaction and stress features and meanings neglected in the original celebration. In this case, at least, it seems that a ritual event *by villagers for* outsiders has given rise to a community celebration *by* villagers *for* themselves.[13]

It may be objected that I am here placing too much emphasis on the outsider/insider dichotomy and barely referring to the competitive results of class tension which, some would say, provide a more convincing explanation of these paired events. According to this view, the disco is the lower class response to and comment on the middle class *Lejla Ħarrubija* and the paired structural features I outlined are to be understood in this light. While acknowledging that class tension is part of the fuel which drives people to create these paired ritual events, I would still attribute great importance to the insider/outsider dichotomy and this for the following reasons:

1. While the organisers of the two events I described do seem to be opposed in class terms, many of the participants overlap. The appeal of the late night disco for those who take part in it, is therefore not solely that of class loyalty.

2. One could argue that the insider/outsider dichotomy is manipulated by the lower class youths in order to add piquancy to their rejection of middle-class values. This view, however, still assumes that participants to these ritual events reflect on the difference between villagers and outsiders and that they feel strongly enough about it to stage celebrations specifically for internal consumption.

3. Class conflict alone does not really explain the structural features which point to a tight and intimate connection between these two ritual events. If the disco were solely a means to carry on class conflict, there would be no reason to make it an "insider" event in opposition to such an explicitly "outsider" event as the *Lejla Ħarrubija.* One would also expect the disco to contain denigratory symbolical references to the higher social classes, whereas most of the messages which are sent in these ritual events seem to focus on the village's identity , the dichotomy between past and modern and that between outsiders and insiders.

It may also be claimed that I am falling into the common anthropological trap of drawing too many inferences from a single case. However, anybody who reflects on the characteristic structure of the Maltese festas will note how often celebrations seem to refer to each other. There seems to be such a relationship between the band marches which are held for the villagers only and those which are widely patronised by tourists. Furthermore, I have alrady referred to the increase in insider celebrations which Boissevain has noted throughout Southern Europe. He has associated this, *inter alia*, with increased tourism from Northern Europe. The Ħal-Ħarrub material suggests that tourism results in an intensified awareness of the distinction between insiders and outsiders, resulting in ritual events which owe their appeal precisely to the way in which they engage with the issues of identity thus posed.

Thus the effect of tourism on community celebrations is not explicable by reference to any facile theory of promotion or destruction. Whilst it may have a hand in destroying certain community celebrations, tourism may also provoke the creation of new ones. These ritual events are often dissimilar in their forms and their intended audiences. Play is counterpoised to ritual, outsider events to insider events, lower classes to middle classes.[14] The important point is that community celebrations are dynamic entities which are often in a dialectical relationship to each other. This antithetical relationship finds expression in the structure and meaning of these celebrative events, leading to sets of sharply contrasted features. In these cases there is often a connecting thread in the idiom in which the celebrations are expressed, the temporal setting of the events[15] or some other structural feature. This connecting thread forms an integral part of the sets of dichotomies, serving to intensify the symbolic effect of the contrasting features.

*Dr David E. Zammit is Assistant Lecturer in the Faculty of Law, University of Malta and a Ph.D. candidate in legal anthropology at the University of Durham (U.K.)*

## Notes

1. In speaking of "community celebrations", I am using the term Manning uses to describe performances which are (a) entertainment, (b) public and (c) participatory. For further information, refer to Manning Frank (ed.), *The Celebration of Society*, (1983), Bowling Green: Popular Press. The term "tourism" has no specialized or technical meaning, as employed here.
2. I am indebted to the University of Malta for giving me the opportunity to conduct this field-work in the period of June/August 1991, as part of my Summer work-phase.
3. Traditional folk-singing, performed by singers known as *għannejja*.
4. The precise year when the *Lejla Ħarrubija* started is apparently 1982.
5. Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, 1983, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p.1